

Speech: Britain has been shaping the world for centuries. That won't change with Brexit: article by Jeremy Hunt

The 18th-century Scottish poet Robert Burns was perhaps the most gifted wordsmith of his age. Every foreign minister should ponder one of his lines: "Oh, would some Power give us the gift / To see ourselves as others see us!"

When I picture how others see Britain right now, I suspect old friends are shaking puzzled heads. The clash and thunder over Brexit is not an appealing spectacle. Some may feel that British politicians are acting out Monty Python sketches in real life.

So please put aside the doom-laden commentary and accept my assurance: We British are neither abandoning our neighbours nor retreating from the world. We have not taken leave of our senses.

True, our Parliament can be exasperating. But in a democracy that is also its job. The mother of parliaments is proud, fiercely independent and sovereign. If the British government must fight for every vote on something as crucial as our country's place in Europe, that is as it should be. If we lose sometimes, that too is democracy. For all the pressure it puts me under personally, I take pride in answering to a parliament that is impossible to suborn.

In some countries, disputes of this kind might spill violently onto the streets. In Britain, our national debate on Brexit has been contained within our democratic institutions. We have been through worse – the repeal of the Corn Laws, for instance, poisoned British politics for a generation after 1846. We have also shown resilience in the most supreme of tests – maintaining parliamentary democracy and removing a respected prime minister even as the country fought for its life during World War II. Having survived such tests, British institutions will overcome this one too.

Look beneath the surface and Britain's international position remains unchanged. The United Kingdom is a small archipelago, with rather less than 1% of the world's population. Alongside the United States we have done more to shape the world we live in than any other country and remain in the global top five of most important leagues.

We have the fifth-biggest economy in the world, the No.1 financial centre in our hemisphere and the second-biggest military budget in NATO.

We reliably supply three of the world's top 10 universities in surveys and are often ranked at or near the top for 'soft power'. When it comes to innovation, we are fourth in the global league, according to an annual index compiled by organizations including Cornell University and the World Intellectual Property Organization. And we continue to rank highest for

business-friendliness.

Don't forget that Britain also possesses a nuclear deterrent, globally deployable armed forces and two new aircraft carriers. We like to believe we are the most capable ally America has. We've been with you in Afghanistan from the beginning in 2001; our servicemen and women have helped you to take apart the Islamic State in the Middle East.

And we do more for European security than any of our neighbours. Right now British soldiers are the single biggest contingent of NATO's deployment in Poland and the Baltic states.

It might seem odd that we are protecting these European Union members in the middle of Brexit negotiations. In truth, it's entirely logical. Britain is leaving the structures of the EU, which we joined as recently as 1973, as that organization moves from economic cooperation to political union. But our unconditional commitment to the security of our continent long predates our EU membership and will not waver after we leave.

In fact, one of the few things that unites British politicians of all parties and our European counterparts is that we plan to work hand-in-glove on foreign and security policy after Brexit. Our vital interests and values are going to stay aligned, just as they will with the United States.

So once Brexit has happened, be in no doubt that Britain will retain all the capabilities of a global power. You may be the superpower but our worldwide network of alliances and friendships places Britain among the handful of countries with genuinely global reach. We want to put it at the service of the democratic values both our countries share.

As the country steps up to our global destiny, I follow in a remarkable tradition. The first foreign secretary, Charles James Fox, abolished the slave trade. Another, George Canning, reshaped South America by helping its countries to achieve independence.

Outside my office stands a bust of Ernest Bevin, who was an architect of NATO exactly 70 years ago and arguably did as much for European security as any other post-war European politician. Bevin also ensured that Britain stayed out of the supranational body that came before the EU. He saw no contradiction between those two positions – and he was right.

Britain has been shaping the world for centuries and we're here to stay.